

ACT ONE -- SCENE ONE

SCENE: *Twenty-three years earlier. A fresh boy's voice is heard singing a love song in a subdued tone. The light slowly reveals the exterior of DONATA's home on a canal, Venice. MARCO POLO, a boy of fifteen, youthfully handsome and well made, is standing in a gondola beneath a barred window of the house, a guitar over his shoulder. The song finished, he waits anxiously. A hand is thrust out to him through the bars. He kisses it passionately. It is hurriedly withdrawn. DONATA'S face appears pressed against the bars. She is a girl of twelve, her face pale and pretty in the moonlight.*

DONATA. (*coily and tenderly*) You mustn't, Mark.

MARCO. There's no harm in that -- just kissing your hand!

DONATA. (*demurely*) It's a sin, I'm sure of it.

MARCO. (*with a quick movement of his own hand, captures hers through the bars*) Then I'll have to steal it, and that's a worse sin. (*He pulls her willing hand down toward his lips.*)

DONATA. You're hurting my fingers.

MARCO. (*boldly now*) Then I know how to cure them. (*He kisses them one by one*) There!

DONATA. (*tenderly*) You silly boy! Why do you do that?

MARCO. (*very seriously*) You know, Donata.

DONATA. Know what? (*Softly*) Go on and tell me, Mark.

MARCO. (*blurts out gruffly*) I love you, that's what. I've loved you ever since I can remember. And you've known it right along, too, so there's no good pretending.

DONATA. (*Softly*) I wasn't sure.

MARCO. (*recklessly*) And how about you? Do you love me? You've got to answer me that!

DONATA. You know -- without my saying it.

MARCO. Please say it!

DONATA. (*in a whisper*) I love you. There, silly!

MARCO. And you'll promise to marry me when I come back?

DONATA. Yes, but you'll have to ask my parents.

MARCO. (*easily*) Don't worry about them. They'll be glad, and my folks, too. It'll bring the two firms into closer contact.

DONATA. (*practically*) Yes, I think so, too. (*A pause. Songs and music come from near and far-off in the night about them. MARCO has gained possession of her two hands now and his face is closer to the bars of her window.*)

MARCO. (*with a sigh*) It's beautiful tonight. I wish I didn't have to go away.

DONATA. I wish, too! Do you really have to?

MARCO. Yes. And I want to, too -- all but leaving you. I want to travel and see the world and all the different people, and get to know their habits and needs from first-hand knowledge. You've got to do that if you want to become really big and important. That's what Father says -- and Uncle.

DONATA. But won't this trip so very far away be full of danger?

MARCO. (*boastfully*) I can take care of myself. Uncle says taking chances -- *necessary* chances, of course -- is the best schooling for a real merchant and Father has a saying that where there's nothing risked, there's nothing gained. And they ought to know, oughtn't they, after spending nine years at the court of the Great Kaan and traveling there and back?

DONATA. Is that where you're going?

MARCO. Yes. He's the richest king in the world and Uncle and Father are personal friends of his. They did a lot of work for him. I'll be on the right side of him from the start, and Father and Uncle both say there's millions to be made in his service if you're not afraid of work and keep awake to opportunity.

DONATA. I'm sure you'll succeed. But I wish you weren't going for so long.

MARCO. I'll miss you as much as you miss me. (*Huskily*) I hate to leave you, Donata -- but I've got to make my own way -- so we can marry --

DONATA. (*hurriedly*) Yes -- of course -- only come back as soon as you can.

MARCO. But you'll wait, won't you, no matter how long?

DONATA. (*solemnly*) Yes, I swear to, Mark.

MARCO. And I swear by God I'll come back and marry you, and I'll always be true and never forget or do anything --

DONATA. (*startled by a noise from within*) Sssh! There's someone moving inside. You'll have to go. Here. (*She hands him a locket*) It's a medallion of me painted by an artist who owed Father for spices and couldn't pay with money. Will you keep looking at this all the time you're away and never forget me?

MARCO. (*kissing it passionately*) Every day!

DONATA. And you'll write me?

MARCO. I promise. Every chance I get.

DONATA. (*hesitatingly*) Will you write me -- a poem? I won't care how short it is if it's only a poem.

MARCO. I'll try, Donata. I'll do my best.

DONATA. I'll just love it to death, Mark! (*Startledly*) Sssh! I hear it again. It must be Father. I've got to sneak back.

MARCO. (*desperately*) Won't you kiss me -- let me really kiss you -just one -- for good-bye?

DONATA. I mustn't.

MARCO. Just once -- when I'm going so far away? (*Desperately*) I-I-I'll die if you don't!

DONATA. Well -- just once. (*The moonlight fades into darkness as their lips meet. Then from the darkness are their voices heard in hushed tones*) Good-bye, Mark.

MARCO. Good-bye, Donata. (*The sentimental singing voices and guitars are heard from all corners of the night in celebration of love. The sound gradually grows fainter and fainter, receding into the distance, as if MARCO were already leaving Venice behind him.*)

DARKNESS